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FINAL REPORT ON THE WORKSHOP

WOMEN IN LOCAL DECISION MAKING

5.2-14

PRESENTED TO THE

CANADA-SASKATCHEWAN ECONOMIC REGIONAL
DEVELOPMENT AGREEMENT

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I. ABSTRACT

Relatively few women in Canada hold elected public office, whether at the federal, provincial or municipal levels of government. The main purpose of this project was to address the underrepresentation of women in local government through the development and implementation of a workshop. Participants had an opportunity to identify areas of potential involvement in their communities, analyze their knowledge, skills and attitudes which would qualify them to hold public office, identify barriers and supports to involvement and develop strategies and skills which would assist them in participating in local government.

The workshop was attended by 85 women in rural Saskatchewan. It was a first step in the long process of equalizing the numbers of males and females in local government decision making bodies. Further initiatives are being planned.

II. BACKGROUND AND PROJECT OBJECTIVES

Relatively few women in Canada hold elected public office, whether at the federal, provincial or municipal levels of government. A review of the 1986 Saskatchewan Municipal Directory shows that Saskatchewan women, like women in other parts of the country are severely under-represented in municipal decision-making bodies.

For example, out of the 299 rural municipalities, 93.3% are headed by male reeves, 1.7% are headed by female reeves, and 4.7% could not be determined as the names could be used by both men and women. Each rural municipality is divided into divisions, with 95% of the 1798 divisions led by men and 1.3% led by women.

This under-representation has a negative impact on the women, as well as the communities to which they belong. Women are not developing their leadership capabilities and are lacking direct input into decisions which directly affect their own quality of life. More importantly, communities, particularly rural communities, are being deprived of the benefit of women's skills, knowledge and abilities. The survival of a community is partly a function of the leadership abilities and group skills possessed by the members of the community. At present, the skills and abilities of a large portion of the population, namely women's skills and abilities, are not being utilized in the political and economic planning process of these communities.

In order to address the problem, the Women and Education Saskatchewan Institute, Division of Extension, University of Saskatchewan developed a leadership workshop aimed at increasing women's involvement in community decision-making organizations. A pilot workshop, developed by Lillas Brown, an adult educator, was held in Eston Saskatchewan in the fall of 1985. The pilot was based on needs survey and literature review. The positive evaluation of this pilot resulted in a submission of a proposal to the Canada Saskatchewan Economic Regional Development Agreement to offer a revised workshop in seven other Saskatchewan communities. These were implemented in the fall of 1987. The objectives of the workshop were as follows:

1. Assist rural women in the identification of opportunities that exist in their community for involvement in decision-making bodies.
2. Motivate rural women to become politically aware and involved in local decision making.

3. Increase self-confidence of rural women through an analysis of the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess which qualify them to hold a public office.
4. Identify perceived and actual barriers to women's political involvement and develop strategies to assist them to overcoming these barriers.
5. Provide information that is needed and the skill development that is required by rural women who choose to become involved in the local decision-making process.
6. Assist rural women in the development of a network of similar minded women who wish to support each other in their efforts to further their involvement in local decision making.

III. PROCESS USED TO IMPLEMENT PROJECT

A letter was sent to all Regional Colleges in the province and a number of individuals, inviting them to act as community contacts for the implementation of the workshop. Background information on the workshop was also included. In total twenty-two communities indicated an interest in sponsoring the workshop. Ten communities, relatively spread apart, were chosen. Once the contacts were made arrangements for the implementation were carried out by phone and confirmed by letter. A brochure was developed and distributed to a number of networks as well as to the community contacts. This work was done by an administrative assistant to the project.

Meanwhile a facilitator was hired on a contract basis to re-design the pilot workshop, and to develop a leader's guide, handout materials for the participants, reading materials, and an evaluation. The workshop was implemented by the facilitator in 7 communities around the province. In total 85 women participated in the workshop. The community contacts were also asked to evaluate the experience. Letters of thank you were sent to the community contacts and additional materials, requested by the participants were forwarded to them after each workshop.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Demographic Data on Participants

Age: Thirty-two percent of the participants were in the 30 to 39 age group, followed by 27% in the 40 to 49 age group. Sixteen percent of the participants were in the 50 to 59 age group, followed by 14% in the 20-29 age group and 11% in the over 60 age group.

Education level: Women with diverse educational backgrounds attended. The highest level obtained by 8% of the participants was elementary school. Sixteen percent of the participants had completed a university degree. Others indicated some university classes (26%) and the remainder indicated training, diplomas or certificates from a variety of sources.

Work background: Thirty-four percent of the participants were engaged in part-time paid employment, while 33% were in full-time paid employment. Twenty-two percent called themselves self-employed, 6% were retired and 4% were unemployed. It is interesting to note that 48 % of the participants called themselves full-time homemakers. Considering the large numbers that are employed, engaged in volunteer work, or enrolled as students, this may indicate heavy demands on the time of these women.

Marital status: Eighty-five percent of the women are married. Seven percent are divorced, followed by 5% who are widows and 3% who are single, never married.

B. Organizational Features

Publicity: Fourty percent of the participants heard about the workshop being held in their community from a friend. Thirty-three percent read about the workshop or saw an advertisement in their local paper. Other avenues were from an organization, receiving brochure in mail, picking up brochure, through a newsletter or on the radio.

A number of the participants had suggestions as to how publicity could be improved. The most frequently voiced comment was that the name of the workshop (Let's Get Involved) may have

deterred attendance. It was felt that women were already very involved in their communities and did not want suggestions as to how to get more involved. More information on the workshop content would have helped. Some women expressed the feeling that they would have appreciated a more detailed brochure.

Other features: A large majority of the participants were very satisfied with the location of the workshop, room climate (except for one center), date and time, coffee and food services, registration fee and sufficient lead time to prepare for the course. A number would have appreciated receiving the hand out materials before the course was held in order that they could be discussed during the workshop.

C. The Overall Program

Length of workshop: Eighty-four percent of the participants stated that the length of the program was about right. Sixteen percent said it was too short. All of the comments about workshop length were about the lack of time to cover all that they wanted to. Participants stated that they wanted more group discussion time in order to share information and ideas. They specifically asked for a follow-up workshop.

Overall value: When asked to judge the overall value of the workshop, 22% said it was extremely valuable, 60% said it was definitely valuable, and 18% stated it was of some value. Since all of the comments under this question were of a positive nature, we have no way of judging why the workshop for 18% of the participants was only of some value. The following are a sampling of comments received:

- I had confidence before but now look out!
- I feel that it will give me the push to get "unstuck".
- Intend to implement some it right now.
- Condensed ideas and organized concepts that were jumbled in my mind.

Mix of theroy and practice: Ninety-six percent sasid that the mix of theory and parctice in the workshop was about right. Two percent said that there was too much theory and another 2% said there was too much practice.

Time to practice new skills and concepts: Sixty-six percent said that there was adequate time to practice new skills and concepts, while 28% felt that there was not enough time.

Suggestions from participants for improving the workshop: Most of the suggestions centered on the need for more time. Participants were anxious to go into more depth in some areas as well as have more time for group discussion. A number said they found the day stimulating the thought-provoking and wouldn't change any of it.

Topics that should be added: Every comment dealt with a desire to go into more depth in each topic covered. For example, participants wanted more information and discussion as to how to deal with practical barriers, assertion skills, how as a group leader to motivate people, learning the "ropes' of boards, and leadership development. With regard to the question as to topics that could be dropped from the workshop the participants felt that none could be dropped.

D. Evaluation of Trainers

Participants were asked to rate the trainers on a number of aspects of performance by checking don't agree(DA), agree(A) and strongly agree(SA) with each of the following statements. Responses, as a percentage, are included.

Trainers were well prepared: D 1%; A 14%; SA 85%.
Trainers knowledge of course material was excellent: D 1%; A 16%; SA 83%.
Trainers communicated in a clear and understandable manner: D 1%; A 15%; SA 84%.
Trainers were sensitive to the needs of the group: D 1%; A 24%; SA 75%.
I was given ample opportunity to make contributions: D 1%; A 30%; SA 69%.
Trainers related use of course content to "work" situation: D 4%; A 42%; SA 54%.
Trainers use of materials/exercises/visual aids was well done: D 1%; A 29%; SA 70%.

E. Segments of Workshop Evaluation

An overwhelming majority of the participants evaluated each segment of the workshop as excellent. Only a few rated the segments as average.

F. Concluding Comments of Participants

Every participant indicated that they would recommend the workshop to others. Some of the comments given are:
Definitely very worthwhile, educating and stimulating
A very well thought out agenda.
I feel it is almost necessary education for women today.
A large majority indicated they would definitely be interested in a follow-up session. A wide array of topics were suggested.

G. Evaluation Comments of Community Contacts

The workshop was offered in ten communities and implemented in seven. Two of the community contacts, in the three centers where the workshop was offered but not implemented, could not provide any clear reasons as to why a low registration resulted. The other community contact stated they had made may efforts to publicize the workshop but the interest was low. She partly attributed this to the fact that she was new in the community. Subsequent phone calls to potential registrants revealed some interesting comments. One women stated that she had heard about the session and was interested in it, however since the community built a new recreation center, life revolved only around the center. She said,"Many women spent most of their days driving kids to games and other activities and doing volunteer work." One woman stated, "We are just not in the habit as women of looking after our own needs. We always put our families first."

The questionnaire to community contacts asked six questions. They are summarized below:
- Problems encountered implementing project from standpoint of community: Most expressed concern about the title of the workshop. "Let's Get Involved" turned people away as many said they were already involved enough. This made it difficult to get people to register. Some confused the intent of workshop and thought it was to encourage women to get involved in partisan politics. One person had difficulty in doing promotion for the workshop but attributed this to her lack of knowledge of the region and the newness of her job.
- Problems encountered implementing project from standpoint of University: All stated the support was positive and that they had no problems in this regard. One person commented that she should have asked for more information on the project since she was asked questions in the community she could not answer. All of the support materials(brochures, press release, lots of lead time, registration information, phone calls) were appreciated. Information was very clear.

- Additional support they would have liked to receive: A small petty cash fund to help promote workshop through letters, phone calls. This cost was absorbed by local organizers. Perhaps posters could have been provided.
- Changes they would make with regard to implementation: The name should be changed.
- Community contacts who worked with the Regional College system felt they had been given good information and support from their superiors. (The initial notice about the workshop was sent to College Principals).
- Other comments: Feedback has been excellent. We definitely need more workshops like this. Could a follow-up session be organized? Thank you for giving us the opportunity to host the workshop and be part of the process.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPACT

It is clear from the response of participants, their comments on the evaluation and during the day, that the objectives of the project were met. It is debateable whether many of the participants will indeed become part of decision-making bodies in their communities. Certainly participants expressed desires to change the roles they played in their communities, but for most this workshop was a first step. This is especially so when one considers the many barriers to their participation.

Current literature is clear that the barriers to women's participation in the political realm run deep. Bourque and Grossholtz (1984) examined various studies of women's political participation and political socialization. They question the research practices and interpretation of the research results.They state that this research has given rise to misconceptions regarding women's political capacities and interests. The orientation of researchers has led to the conclusion "...that the fault lies with the excluded group who simply will not get organized and participate in the ways open to them." (pp. 103) The behaviour of those who now hold positions of power is accepted as the norm or standard and questions of "...why or if this should be so, or how to overcome the impediments to 'proper' behaviour...." (pp.104) are seldom asked. Bourque and Grossholtz (1984) have documented four distortions in the research on women in politics. Since effective action programs depend on a clear estimation of the barriers, obtained from research, further work in this area will have to be done with a understanding of the distortions. Briefly, the distortions cited are:

- 'fudging the footnotes' or misuse of data of earlier work.
- 'assumption of male dominance' and failure to question this occurence, why it happens and what are the implications.
- 'masculinity as ideal political behavior' assumptions that are unexplained and unexamined with respect to a masculine ideal as the norm for political behavior.
- 'commitment to the eternal feminine' assumption that women's present weak political position is necessary and functional. (pp.104)

Brodie (1985) has raised similar concerns, this time in a Canadian context. In her estimation the literature has uncritically accepted a few broad explanations for women's lack of participation. Some of these, for example, "hormone-based" explanations find little support today. The "socialization" explanation and the

closely related "gender-role explanation" are most accepted and common. However, Brodie (1985) states, "Neither...is a sufficient explanation for the division of political power by gender." (pp. 8) Brodie's research in this area and her developmental model of women's political participation provide an excellent source of information for planners of action programs.